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Chapter 12

Democratic ‘Sacred Spaces’: Public Architecture and Transitional Justice

Mihaela Mihai

‘Transitional Justice’ (TJ) covers the institutional mechanisms a society employs in order to deal with a past of violence and injustice. Truth commissions, criminal trials, restitution, compensation, and lustration are frequently used to address the legacies of authoritarianism or civil war. While a large literature examines these mechanisms,¹ less attention has been paid to the symbolic facet of the past.² This chapter seeks to explore the architectural dimension of TJ. More precisely, it asks what aspiring democracies should do with public constructions glorifying an undemocratic, i.e. racist, authoritarian or totalitarian, past.

Public constructions attest to political regimes’ desire to imprint their version of history on the country’s landscape and, more importantly, on the memory of citizens. Statues, memorials and monuments set in stone a certain view of the past, usually in glorious and heroic terms. Hierarchies of all kinds (political, social, racial, gendered) are reflected in – and reproduced through – public art, one of the many ‘voices’ through which the state speaks. What is celebrated or commemorated is as significant as what is forgotten: defeats, reprehensible deeds by the nation, as well as marginalized groups are usually omitted from the material representation of the official story.

This chapter starts with the assumption that it is liberal democracies, or societies aspiring to become liberal democracies, that invest in TJ. Far from being a universal phenomenon, TJ is normatively and politically linked with a certain kind of regime: one committed to human rights, based on the idea of equal respect and concern for all members of the polity. The main argument advanced here is that condoning public monuments that symbolically humiliate certain groups is normatively inconsistent for a liberal democracy. In other words, the public funding of state-

¹ For some recent contributions to this rich field see Eisikovits 2010, Olsen et al. 2010, Arthur 2011, Corradetti 2012, May 2012.

² There is a large literature on museums and memorials in history, art history and anthropology, but not much has been written about public art seen through the lenses of TJ. For some seminal texts see: Young 2000, Winter 1995, Michalski 1998, Coombes 2003, Walkowitz and Knauer 2004, Lehrer et al. 2011, Czepczynski 2012.

commissioned monuments occupying a society's 'sacred space' is problematic to the extent that it violates the egalitarian and inclusive theory of moral worth that liberal democracy presupposes. In talking about 'sacred space' I follow Sanford Levinson, who defines it as 'public cemeteries, state and national capitol grounds, and other ground that is invested with special meaning within the structure of the civil religion that helps to constitute a given social order' (Levinson 1998, 36–7).

This contribution proceeds in several steps. The first section offers a schematic account of liberal democracy and of what could count as symbolic humiliation in such a regime. I then move on to a critical examination of Sanford Levinson's take on what to do with humiliating monuments. I assess his seminal work on democracy and public monuments and argue that, while liberal democracies can choose from a variety of possible avenues of disavowal, certain ways of dealing with objectionable public constructions are normatively problematic. The third section offers two examples, one of a racist, the other of a totalitarian construction. While this chapter is an exercise in normative theory, I use cases to illustrate my theoretical analysis and show the salience of the issues addressed here. The conclusion deals with some potential criticisms.

Liberal Democracy: Institutional Order, Normative Regime, and Ethos

As mentioned before, this chapter departs from the assumption that TJ is typical of liberal democracies or societies aspiring to become liberal democracies. Liberal democracy is conceptualized here as an institutional order and an ethos guided by a number of normative principles. As a normative regime, liberal democracy presupposes an egalitarian theory of human worth,³ which determines the limits of state powers, as well as the rights and duties that citizens enjoy. Democratic institutions are supposed to approximate in practice the value of equal respect and concern that moral egalitarianism presupposes. At the same time, institutions need to encourage their citizens to internalize these principles: like any other political regime, liberal democracy depends for its reproduction on the robustness of an ethos of mutual respect and concern.

Given that liberal democracy is the goal of transitional processes, the values it presupposes set the objectives of, as well as the constraints on, TJ projects. In other words, the public affirmation and

³ I borrow the concept of 'a theory of human worth' from Murphy and Hampton 1988.

institutionalization of the value of respect and concern for all requires that certain TJ measures be taken, and that they be taken in certain ways. The commitment to equality demands that institutional steps be taken to address the violations of the past and the concerns of the victims in a way that does not scapegoat the victimizers. While a massive literature has been dedicated to the needs of the victims within the typical TJ processes (Hayner 2001, Stover and Weinstein 2004, Philpott 2006, Torpey 2006, Urban Walker 2006, Verdeja 2009, Leebaw 2011), less has been written on the symbolic humiliation that certain public constructions inherited from a previous regime can inflict on previously oppressed groups (Levinson 1998; Coombes 2003; Bell 2008). This is rather surprising given that statues, flags and portraits are often revolutionaries' first victims. In what follows, I will introduce Christian Neuhäuser's (2011) account of collective symbolic humiliation as a useful tool for understanding what is at stake in doing monumental justice in the aftermath of democratic change.

In Neuhäuser's view, humiliations 'attempt to lower someone below the status of a human being as a person with dignity through an improper attitude or treatment' (2011, 22). While it is undisputable today that individuals have dignity and can be humiliated, it is more controversial to argue that groups can suffer demeaning treatment. Neuhäuser thinks that, by outlining a typology of group humiliations, it will become clear to what extent one can meaningfully talk of group humiliation.

The first form of group humiliation he discusses is *direct*: it targets all the members of the group precisely because they are the members of the group. It is only because they belong to this group that a certain set of characteristics is ascribed to these individuals, characteristics that, in the eyes of the humiliating agent, justify the demeaning treatment. The example the author gives is of imagined – yet not too implausible – police filters being established on airports to exclusively check those who appear to be Muslims. I would add the more mundane examples that could be derived from the historical – and continued – marginalization of women and homosexuals, racial profiling or the 'stop-and-frisk' policies in operation in some parts of the US. Certain groups' exclusion from the protective scope of liberal democratic rights amounts to *direct* humiliation.

Neuhäuser then turns to *representative* group humiliation, which he describes as the humiliation of a whole group through the humiliation of one of its members. For representative group

humiliation to obtain, three conditions must be fulfilled: '(I) the humiliation is directed against a collectively shared part of identity; (II) this shared part of identity is constitutive for the self-respect of the members of this group; (III) the humiliation is sanctioned on a social level and/or no appropriate measures against it are taken' (Neuhäuser 2011, 30). Clear examples are Rodney King's beating or the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. In all these cases, individuals were singled out for their identity and debased by virtue of possessing that identity.

The third type of group humiliation – and the one that is of most importance for this chapter – is *symbolic* group humiliation. In this case, a symbol of the group is defiled and the defiling 'is connected to past humiliations or the threat of present humiliations' (Neuhäuser 2011, 32). Destroying Jewish cemeteries and showing abasing portraits of gays on TV are the two examples Neuhäuser offers for this category. In order to understand the humiliating dimension of these acts it is necessary to examine the intention behind them. If the symbolic act expresses an exclusionary attitude, if it shows that less respect and concern is owed to individuals, if there is a possibility that the members of the group will face threats by virtue of belonging to that group, then we are witnessing *symbolic* group humiliation.

As will become clear later on, this chapter argues that *symbolic* humiliation is perpetuated if successor states leave unaddressed – or continue to sponsor – monuments, memorials and other public buildings that populate a polity's 'sacred space' and transmit a message about (some) citizens' inferiority. Public constructions that contradict moral egalitarianism endanger the normative integrity of a liberal democracy and can, under certain circumstances, negatively impact the institutions' legitimacy. Representing certain groups as less than human, glorifying former victimizers, or excluding the members of marginalized groups from monuments are just three of the ways in which public constructions can symbolically humiliate citizens.

The second section will employ the idea of *symbolic* humiliation to critically engage Sanford Levinson's path-breaking book on the ways in which a democracy can deal with its undemocratic monuments. While Levinson's recommendations constitute a good starting point for reflection on monumental transitional justice, I argue that his preference for a policy of monumental inclusion

needs to be tempered by a concern with moral egalitarianism and what it implies for the state as the main memory entrepreneur.⁴

The Limits of Democratic Monumental Inclusion

Levinson's *Written in Stone* (2011) is one of the few works that tries to examine the normative connection between democratic ideals and the public art occupying a country's 'sacred space'. While his book explores a multitude of cases from all over the world in order to highlight the vulnerability of public art to political change, his main focus lies with the South of the United States and the challenges that monuments dedicated to the confederate cause pose for democracy. This section seeks to recuperate the theoretical tools Levinson offers us, while at the same time critically engaging with his account of democratic monumental inclusion.

Levinson's starting point is that 'sacred grounds' serve as the space for public art, art that is never innocent or neutral. He quickly – and correctly, I think – dismisses the idea that the state should remain neutral with regard to the figures and events it celebrates or commemorates. Public constructions constitute the means through which the state seeks to inculcate certain attitudes in the citizens: attitudes favourable to the normative, political, and cultural order the state embodies (2011, 38–9). The problem is that the public is often divided over who their heroes are. For example, in the case of the United States, many racist monuments punctuate the Southern states, sitting uneasily with the principles the American society currently embraces, at least at the declarative level. The Liberty Monument in New Orleans or the statues of the generals who led the Confederate army in Richmond constitute such examples. The question then is, how should a democratic state deal with racist monuments that can still resonate with a large part of the American citizenry?

In trying to answer this question democratically, Levinson proposes a number of suggestions (2011, 114–23). First, the state can leave the problematic monument as it is, as a testimony of the past and as representative of certain views entertained by sectors of the American public. Since democracy is a regime of inclusiveness, leaving the monument untouched gives voice to the groups who identify

⁴ The state is the main memory entrepreneur due to the disproportionate amount of resources it usually commands in comparison with private agents.

with that version of history glorified by the construction. Second, he suggests placing a plaque stating that the state does not identify with the ideas depicted in the monument – a symbolic distancing from a past of violence. Third, the authorities could install a sign affirming the state's indifference to the message the monument transmits to the public. In this sense, the state would adopt a neutral position towards the various (material) visions of history. Fourth, Levinson proposes that the state explicitly disavow the ideas the construction materializes. A clear-cut discontinuity would thus be marked between the times of inequality and victimization, and the new era of democratic inclusiveness. Fifth, a monument celebrating those who resisted the *ancien régime* could be erected as a counterweight, with or without an explanatory plaque. This would amount to a recalibrating of the balance of symbolic power in the 'sacred space.' Similarly, the sixth idea is to build a multitude of monuments dedicated to the various groups of victims who suffered under the previous regime. Seventh, Levinson recommends the historicization of the monument by means of its museumification. Moving the monument within the precinct of a museum relegates it to the past, at a distance from the present and the values society currently celebrates. Eighth, one could sandblast the text inscribed on the monument and either replace it with a more appropriate one or leave it blank for the viewer's interpretation. Ninth, the most radical solution: destroy the monument.

Levinson's nine recommendations have great potential in terms of formulating a democratically appropriate policy of dealing with democratically inappropriate monuments. Armed with the theoretical tools developed in the previous section, let us now examine them one by one.

Leaving the monument as it is could be a tempting proposal for a state aiming to cultivate a plurivocal 'sacred space,' where different and diverging visions of the past can be expressed. Given the contestable character of all 'official stories,' it has been argued that a diverse landscape of competing narratives might be a better solution. For example, Duncan Bell writes: '[I]n order to facilitate a pluralistic radical democracy, it is essential to acknowledge multiple and often conflicting pasts, and the intrinsically power-infused and tension-ridden nature of communal mythological construction' (2008, 149). For authors like Bell, excluding some groups' vision of what happened might humiliate the members of those groups (2008, 159). While I find the idea of a pluralist 'sacred space' powerful and plausible as the solution for our conundrum, the versions of the past competing

for admission can be radically different in terms of their compatibility with an egalitarian theory of moral worth. Given the commitment to equal concern and respect for all citizens, it is contradictory to opt for an unrestricted policy of 'let a thousand flowers bloom'. Some flowers can poison the democratic public space with their scent. In other words, monuments that symbolically humiliate citizens by relegating them to a subordinate position are problematic from a liberal democratic point of view. Leaving the monument as it is, or adding a plaque that affirms the state's neutrality towards the narrative the monument presents, are two courses of action in tension with the fact that liberal democracy is a normative, political and cultural regime seeking to reproduce itself across generations. Once we honestly admit the partisanship of the liberal democratic creed, we understand that not all ways of relating to the past are compatible with the values of this creed. An attitude of 'anything goes' establishes a problematic equivalence between inclusive and exclusive, racist and respectful, totalitarian and democratic ways of looking at past events. Naturally, deciding which monument belongs to which category is a complex business that requires contextualized judgement. However, a good starting point is to think whether the monuments under consideration could symbolically humiliate certain groups by telling a story about their inferiority or by misrepresenting their contribution to the political past of the nation. If that is the case, then a plaque whereby the state distances itself from such problematic understandings of social relations is the least authorities can do to affirm the state's equal concern and respect to all citizens. A sign that explicitly condemns past abuses is an even better way of marking discontinuity with the violations of the previous regime. If the goal is to instil citizens with a democratic ethos and fight against exclusionary attitudes, efforts must be made to purge the 'sacred space' of monuments that symbolically humiliate certain groups and help reproduce undemocratic views.

Levinson's fifth idea – to build an alternative monument – can be compatible with the normative integrity of a liberal democracy as long as the state explicitly addresses the reasoning behind the new construction. Only in this way can a problematic normative equivalence between the two monuments be avoided and relativist positions on the past discouraged. The same goes for building a multitude of monuments to the various groups of victims of a former regime: giving voice

to the silenced victims needs to be accompanied by a public disavowal of the problematic voices of the victimizers.

Museumification can go a long way in ensuring monuments that constitute normatively impermissible glorifications of the past do not continue to humiliate certain groups. Changing the lenses through which we look at such constructions can allow contextualization, a more complex understanding, and even historical learning. However, museumification is not as easy a solution as it appears. As Levinson himself remarks, the burden is on curators to present the monument for what it is and prevent the museum from becoming a place where some are humiliated, while others feed their discriminatory views.

The eighth suggestion – to rewrite the text of the monument – depends on the interpretive malleability of the monument, which is a matter of degree. Some monuments can be more easily appropriated by a democratic regime than others. Should the monument allow for multiple readings, changing the text could be a productive avenue, one that nonetheless requires creativity and careful judgement.

Last but not least, destroying the monument. Levinson accepts the fact that some monuments are so infamous because of their association with a history of atrocity that it is no wonder they should be destroyed. However, I would like to propose that, should the state decide to destroy the monument, an important didactic opportunity might be lost. Rather than razing the monument – and thus risking a backlash from those enamoured with the narrative the monument tells – it might be better to choose from the options discussed above one that clearly disavows political oppression and reaffirms the commitment to fight against anybody's exclusion from without the scope of liberal principles.

Illustrations

This section offers an analysis of two cases, meant to highlight the challenges facing any attempt to deal with materialized symbolic humiliation. I have chosen to examine the Voortrekker Monument south of Pretoria in South Africa and the People's House in Bucharest, Romania. The reason for choosing these two monuments is that they illustrate two forms of symbolic humiliation: *racial* and *political*. The former symbolically humiliates Black South Africans through its portrayal of their ancestors as treacherous killers in need of white civilization, while the latter degrades an entire people

by symbolically expressing the society's subordination to an almighty state and the transformation of citizens into hostages. The two constructions belong to two different transitional contexts: in one case democracy followed a cruel regime of racial segregation, in the other a 'sultanistic'⁵ form of totalitarianism. In addition, they are both particularly large constructions that dominate the 'sacred space' of their home societies, thereby posing particularly difficult practical challenges to the successor elites.

The Voortrekker Monument

In 1931, riding on a wave of growing Afrikaner nationalism, the Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Associations proposed a monument dedicated to the Great Boer Trek of 1838. The state provided most of the finances for the monument but, because of the economic crisis of the 1930s and the breakout of the Second World War, it was inaugurated only in 1949, a few months after one of the nationalist Afrikaner parties won the elections on the apartheid platform (Delmont 1993, 78). The inauguration was a spectacle of obscene ethnic feeling and aggrandizing myth-making, gathering thousands of pilgrims in Boer costumes who symbolically joined the great Trek of white Christian heroes (Coombes 2003, 26). Thus, the political and symbolic triumph of Afrikaner Calvinist Nationalism was emphatically celebrated.

⁵ The term was coined by Linz and Stepan (1998) to refer to a particularly robust and personalized form of authoritarianism.



Figure 12.1 The exterior of the Voortrekker Monument. © Iolanda Vatile

The monument stands on a hill outside Pretoria, directly visible from the South African parliament. It is a large structure in the middle of a wild piece of land – a symbol of white mastery over the vast African veld. Its dimensions were meant to reflect the Afrikaners' contribution to South Africa: it measures 40 metres in length and width and 41 metres in height (Crampton 2001, 237–40). The upper hall – the Hall of Heroes – features a frieze representing the obstacles the heroic trekkers had to overcome on their quest to bring white Christian civilization to the *terra nullius* of in-land South Africa (Beningfield 2006). The frieze shows the Boers as God-fearing, upright, family people, peacefully negotiating their way through the territory, in contradistinction with the barbarous, murderous Zulus, stealth killers subject only to the law of the jungle. Inter-tribal conflict is starkly contrasted with the harmony of the trekkers and is used – as in many places around the world – as a justification for colonization: the indigenous population was not 'fit' to rule the harsh, yet bountiful territory (Delmont 1993, 96; Beningfield 2006, 58). On each 16 December – the day of the 1838 Battle of Blood River against the Zulus, when the trekkers made their vow to honour God if they won

– at midday, a ray of sunlight falls on the cenotaph in the centre of the monument, shining on the inscription ‘We for thee, South Africa.’



Figure 12.2 The Cenotaph. © Iolanda Vasile

This optical effect is considered a sign that God endorsed the trekkers' mission (Delmont, 1993, 88). Such narratives of divinely sanctioned civilizing missions were subsequently instrumental to the legitimization of apartheid.

Before the 1994 elections, the monument became the rallying point of those who resented the impending end of racial segregation. Right wing Afrikaner groups met and voiced their fear of losing their linguistic and material culture at the hands of the ANC. In 1993, the main association for Afrikaner culture invoked cultural preservation so as to buy the right to manage the monument from the outgoing National Party Government. This was a prudential decision and a cynical move to claim a right that had been systematically refused to the indigenous population (Coombes 2003, 32–3).

After 1994, a public debate about the fate of the monument ensued. Some suggested it should be preserved as a reminder of the past violations, while others wanted it demolished. The ANC

decided that all apartheid monuments should be preserved and continued to provide funding to all of them. According to the [website](#) of the monument, it still receives up to 16 per cent of its finances from the state today.⁶ The idea of a massive construction in the shape of Nelson Mandela's hand was proposed as a counterweight, but was soon discarded due to the sculptor's association with apartheid, the totalitarian style of the drawings, and the source of the funding: two companies specializing in skin whitening products (Coombes 2003, 20–22).

Private actors tried to subvert the political message of the monument after 1994. Ironic pornographic photos were taken at the site in 1995. The idea of painting the monument pink and organizing a gay rave inside it was discussed, provoking the outrage of those still enamoured with the version of the past immortalized in the construction. Several other applications to use the monument as a venue for dancing events were rejected by the managing organization (Coombes 2003, 50–51).

Commentators disagree about the power the monument still has today. Some think it holds many Afrikaners captive and insults those Blacks who come to see its distorted representation of colonization (Coombes 2003). Others proposed that Blacks now look on the monumental landscape of apartheid from a position of power and that, consequently, they are no longer affected by it (Grundlingh 2001). The fact remains, however, that the Voortrekker Monument is still one of the most visited in South Africa, with hundreds of thousands of tourists flooding its gates every year (Gauteng Tourist Attractions). The democratic regime did not interfere with the privatization deal, probably in an attempt to relativize the monument's symbolically humiliating representations. However, the post-apartheid state made impressive efforts to counterweigh such racist monuments, District Six and the Robben Island Museums being the clearest examples. Rather than destroying or explicitly censoring the problematic monument, the newly elected officials appear to have embraced the idea that democracy requires a polyphonic public memory. It might be that, given the discourse of national reconciliation promoted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and inscribed in the South African Constitution of 1994, the ANC did not want to further antagonize certain groups and opted for a policy of even-handedness: sponsoring both old and new monuments alike.

⁶ See Voortrekker Monument 2007.

While acknowledging its pragmatic value, many have criticised the approach to reconciliation promoted by the TRC. The reason is that it set on an equal footing the crimes of the apartheid police and the crimes of those fighting for political emancipation. I argue that the same problem plagues the policy of even-handedness the ANC governments took towards material public memory. The fact remains that some of the beneficiaries of the state's even-handedness still tell an exclusionary, racist, and truncated version of history. Nothing in the construction has changed – representationally and narratively – since the end of apartheid: the same story of heroic white civilizers is retold to groups of school pupils and foreign tourists alike. In spite of the counterweight museums, failing to explicitly disavow the skewed version of the past materialized in the Voortrekker Monument establishes a problematic equality between the story of Afrikaner heroism and that of Black suffering under apartheid, thus showing the limits of the state's strategy.

The People's House

Between 1965 and 1989, Romania lived under the most oppressive communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Nicolae Ceaușescu's 'personal neo-Stalinism' (Tismaneanu 1991). The grip of the party-state over society was exceptional. The secret police – the infamous 'Securitate' – annihilated dissidents and 'facilitated' the dictator's programmes of forced urbanization and industrialization, the destruction of the cultural patrimony, the persecution of certain unaligned religions, and a megalomaniac cult of personality (Tismaneanu 1993, Judt 2005).

After the mock trial and execution of the dictator and his wife in 1989, a newly formed organization, the 'Front of National Salvation' (FSN) took over the main institutions of the state. It was made up of former top communist apparatchiks who had been marginalized by the dictator in the last years of the regime. They won the first free elections and stayed in power (as the Social Democratic Party, PSD) until 1997, when the forces of the new (the liberal democrats, the Democratic Convention) won the elections. However, with economic disaster plaguing the liberal democrats' mandate, PSD won the 2000–2004 mandate, and again [in 2012](#).

Beside the reproduction of the communist elite under different guise, the architecture brutally imposed on the country is one of the most enduring legacies of Romanian totalitarianism. After a massive earthquake struck in 1977, the dictator decided to embark on a massive architectural project

for the country's 'sacred space'. The project meant to impose his megalomaniacal tastes on the capital and, at the same time, to 'mould' citizens into politically insignificant, abject subjects. The brutal transformation of Bucharest constituted a manoeuvre to affirm the power of the ubiquitous, all-knowing, and all-powerful state and its leader.

The Civic Centre – the official title of the complex – comprises the House of the Republic and The Victory of Socialism Boulevard, which can be seen from any corner of the capital.⁷ The House of the Republic is the second largest building in the world and carries an estimate price tag of 1.5–4 billion USD (O'Neill 2009). About 20,000 conscripted workers contributed to the building that, in line with the rabidly nationalistic variety of communism that Ceaușescu embraced after 1968, was made exclusively of Romanian materials (Ioan 2009). The adjoining boulevard is longer and wider than the Champs-Élysées and is lined with apartment blocks for the members of the party nomenclature and the state bureaucrats. It also features 42 large, ornate fountains.



⁷ In my discussion of this case I rely on secondary sources but also on my own experience as an intern with an NGO that organized guided visits for high-school pupils in the Romanian Parliament (2002–2003).

Figure 12.3 The Victory of Socialism Boulevard. © Mihaela Mihai

Work on the complex began in 1984 and the building is still today incomplete. 9,300 homes were destroyed and 40,000 people were displaced to make room for the project. Numerous churches, some of them medieval, were either demolished or relocated (Danta 1993). The statistics are staggering: the building is 270 metres long and 240 metres wide, measuring 86 metres above ground and 92 metres underground. It has 1,000 rooms and a total surface of 330,000 metres² (Light 2000, 7).



Figure 12.4 Exterior of the People's House. © Mihaela Mihai

The materialization of this project coincided with the most difficult years for the Romanian population, years marred by intensified political terror and by a humiliating, artificially induced famine⁸ that ultimately led to the fall of the regime. While millions of citizens lived in inhumanly small, crowded, poorly lit and cold apartments – the infamous ‘match boxes’, the staple of the abusive urbanization project – and struggled to survive on strictly rationed food, the House of the Republic

⁸ The famine was the result of an effort to rapidly acquit Romania's sovereign debt and thus affirm international economic independence.

was eating up immense financial and labour resources. In Neuhäuser's terms, the tyrant humiliated the people, both directly and symbolically.

After the violent overthrow of 1989, there was a public debate about what to do with the building. Its name changed to the People's House, in recognition of the fact that it was the people's work that brought it into existence. Because of its association with political oppression, many wanted it demolished; others proposed that a Museum of Communism should be housed in it; some even argued that it could be transformed into a casino (Salecl 1999). Given the reproduction of communist elites after 1989, it was finally decided that work should resume on the building, with a view to relocating the parliament, the Ombudsman and the Constitutional Court to the newly renamed Palace of the Parliament. Ironically enough, this was Ceaușescu's plan: to gather all central institutions in one, extraordinary building.

Guided tours in several languages are currently available to a public mostly composed of foreign tourists (Light 2000). The narrative focuses on the extreme dimensions of the palace and on the Romanian provenience of the construction materials. The bleak story of the labour that went into this project, as well as the discrepancy between this construction and the uncomfortable flats ordinary citizens inhabited before 1989 – and that most Romanians continue to inhabit today – is left out in an effort to present the country in brighter colours (Light 2001).

The main attempt to detoxify the construction was the opening of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC). It occupies one of the wings of the building and was inaugurated with a series of exhibitions exploring the relationship between art, the history of communism, and of the building itself.⁹ Two new glass elevators flank the unit in which the museum is housed, partially muting the heavy external adornments. On the inside, some ornaments were removed and while panelling was installed to neutralize the space for the future exhibitions. Access to the museum remains, however, difficult, as sharing the same building with MPs implies heavy security controls (Ioan 2005).

⁹ For an overview of the opening exhibitions, see MNAC 2004.

While the MNAC could be read as a partially successful attempt to change the register of the building, I want to suggest that it is, on its own, insufficient. The main problem lies with the fact that the successor regime continued to fund work on this building and then relocated to the old seat of power. Such a move cancels all efforts to show discontinuity with a vision of the state as all-powerful, unaccountable, and inaccessible. As the expression of authoritarian politics, the complex marks the 'sacred space' in a way that places citizens in a relation of subordination to the state. During communism, citizens were transformed into subjects, humiliated politically, physically, and symbolically. The disproportionate relationship between the Civic Centre and the rest of the city, as well as the sense of remoteness and fear that one gets when looking at the building from the outside, clearly point to an idea of an absolute, durable state dominating society. In Light's words, the building is 'No sane government would build such an edifice' (2001, 1064).

The question is, what sane *democratic* government would inhabit it in the wake of totalitarianism. The decision to continue injecting funds in the building diverted important resources from a population impoverished and brutalized by the long years of repression. By placing democratic institutions in a construction that sits uneasily with democratic values, the successor elites continue to symbolically humiliate citizens. This is aggravated by the fact that in 2014 Romania still does not have a monumental counterweight or a national museum dedicated to the communist period.

Unfortunately, after 1989, the humiliation of the citizens by the state is not just symbolic, it is also direct: the high levels of systemic corruption marring the central institutions, the generalized public disillusionment with politics and the feebleness and impotence of public protest have been the constant markers of post 1989 politics.¹⁰ In spite of the country's admission to the European Union and meaningful progress in the area of human rights and economic development, Romania remains a country where the political elite does not act responsibly towards its citizens. While the people built the house, while attempts have been made to give the house back to the people by opening it to the

¹⁰ Recent polls show that over 60% of Romanians have very little trust in the democratic institutions and that the perception of institutionalized corruption is very high (Transparency International 2012, INSCOP 2013).

public for visits and by the creation of the MNAC, the people are still politically left outside their house.

Conclusion

While schematic due to space constraints, the empirical analysis highlights the challenges that monumental legacies raise for democracy. South Africa's approach to the Voortrekker Monument seems to follow the line of national reconciliation advanced by the TRC, thus reproducing its normative shortcomings. By continuing to partially sponsor the monument and by not instigating any recalibration of the skewed message written in the stones of the monument, the policy of even-handedness obscures the differences between the suffering of the colonizers and that of the colonized. The message about the immorality of the Zulus and their inferiority to the Trekkers gets reproduced unmodified even today, thus symbolically humiliating those who see their ancestors portrayed as treacherous savages in need of the disciplining force of white civilization. In the wake of apartheid, it is difficult to see how such a narrative could legitimately occupy the democratic 'sacred space.' While counterweight monuments go a long way in levelling the monumental playfield, more needs to be done to prevent the continuing symbolic humiliation and challenge the racist attitudes the monument expresses and encourages.

The Romanian case highlights a more extensive form of symbolic humiliation, one that encompasses the entire population. The continued use of the People's House as the seat of democratic institutions, as well as its financing by the state during the painful years of the transition, fail to mark discontinuity with a past where citizens were nothing more than hostages of the almighty state. The opening of the MNAC could be interpreted as a first step in the direction of disavowal. Yet, the failure to establish a credible counterweight public project and to change the register of the Civic Centre reveal the reproduction of a problematic vision of the relationship between the state and society.

Before I conclude, a few potential criticisms. First, a realist might claim that, during transitional times, there are more urgent imperatives than monumental justice. I agree with such prudential concerns, but I would argue that they only justify the postponing, but not the irrelevance, of disavowal. Plus, given what happens to statues of former leaders and heroes during dramatic moments

of political transformation there are reasons to believe that citizens do care about public monuments they deem humiliating.

Second, one might object that not all monuments are clearly humiliating. Oftentimes, the narrative told is rather ambiguous. This is indeed, a valid observation: some monuments are subtle, allowing multiple interpretations and democratic appropriations. Less radical approaches can be successful in such cases. What to do with such monuments will ultimately remain a contextual, political decision, guided by the aspiration to protect citizens in the present.

Last but not least, one might ask whether democracies need monuments at all. A plausible argument could be made to the effect that a commitment to equality and the glorification of heroic figures are inconsistent. This chapter has taken a less radical route and argued that democracy sets a limit to the kind of monuments democracies can accept as appropriate. Besides normative integrity, transitional societies must also face the functional imperative of historical continuity as cohesive political communities. And, provided monuments are inclusive and do not humiliate anyone, they can play an important role in cultivating a sense of solidarity and stability.

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